
Review: The Religion of Mithras

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Source: *History of Religions*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Aug., 1986), pp. 87-89

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062389>

Accessed: 15/12/2010 12:00

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BOOK REVIEWS

THE RELIGION OF MITHRAS

Mithras. By REINHOLD MERKELBACH. Königstein im Taunus: Hain, 1984. Pp. xvi + 412, including 169 plates. DM 198.

After decades of excavating, collecting, inventorying, and deciphering large amounts of new, primarily monumental and inscriptional, evidence, the time seems to have come for fresh attempts at synthesis in some areas of Graeco-Roman religions. The new work by Reinhold Merkelbach, professor of classical philology at the University of Cologne, Germany, presents a new interpretation of the history and developments of the Mithras religion from its beginnings in the ancient Persian religion to its end in the fourth century C.E. This new synthesis, the author boldly claims, will replace the previous one, now almost a hundred years old, by Franz Cumont.

The author distinguishes among three different periods in the history of Mithras worship. Within each period and beyond, one must assume multiple changes and diverse configurations; but through all the diversity and discontinuity runs a thread of continuity as well that allows for a synthesis of the worship of the god.

Originally a god of hunting, of covenant (*mithra* means “contract”), and of sacrifice, Mithras became an integral part of the religion of Old Persia. The sacrificial killing of the bull, which Merkelbach traces back to the oldest times, continues as part of popular Zoroastrianism in spite of the battle against such sacrifices by Zarathustra. In the feudal system of Old Persia—held together largely by personal bonds between the rulers and the ruled—the loyalty relationships were enacted as rituals as we find them in the Mithra religion: the handshake, the kneeling before the ruler, the oath, and the sacred meal. Mithras served as the divine guarantor and prototype of personal loyalty among the worshipers. Under the Achaemenid kings down to Alexander the Great, Mithras and kingship were closely identified. In particular,

the reports about the killings of the Egyptian Apis bulls by successive Achaemenid kings during their campaigns in Egypt reveal that these kings, at least at crucial moments of history, took on the mythical role of Mithras killing the bull.

The second period covers the worship of Mithras in the hellenistic era, with the evidence coming mainly from the hellenized states of Asia Minor (Pontus, Armenia, Commagene, and Cappadocia). Here especially the ruler cult of Antiochus of Commagene (ca. 70–35 B.C.E.)—wonderfully captured and preserved in stone in the central sanctuary at Nemrud Dagħ—was richly endowed by older Mithras traditions as well as by Greek influences, in particular the interpretation of Mithraism as a cosmic-political ideology and an astral religion.

The third period concerns the mysteries of Mithras as we know them from the Roman Empire. Since Mithras worship had undergone profound changes, these mysteries constitute a “new religion.” What was a public cult in the east had become a secret mystery cult of groups of voluntary devotees in the west. While there are traces of continuity, the differences are such that more than ordinary transformation by and adaptation to new circumstances must be assumed. Taking up an earlier suggestion by Martin P. Nilsson, Merkelbach postulates a fundamental reconstruction of Mithras worship by a founder figure. This unknown person must have had a good understanding of the traditional Mithras religion of the east, but he was also under the influence of Greek ideas, especially Platonic philosophy, when he created the mysteries as an all-encompassing religious and social system.

As the mosaics in particular from Ostia and Rome have revealed, the Mithras mysteries combined the seven grades of initiation with the seven planetary gods in such a way that the religious life of the initiates symbolized their ascension through the planetary spheres into the heavenly world. This cult, however, was by no means only otherworldly oriented. On the contrary, it proved to be an almost perfect instrument to express and perpetuate loyalty relationships between the emperor, the officers of the army, and the administrative officials governing the country. The more seriously the political stability eroded, the more Mithras sanctuaries were built. Case studies of the careers of individual officers and officials show that these careers were connected to networks of Mithras worship. The rapid expansion between ca. 140 and 320 must therefore have been the result of rigorous promotion rather than of unplanned growth. Mithraism had become the religious “cement” that held the empire together. In addition, under the influence of Neoplatonic literary and philosophical figures, Mithraism developed further into a philosophical astral religion characteristic of late antiquity.

Paradoxically, the strength of Roman Mithraism was also the reason for its relatively quick demise. Once the emperor had become Christian, the nature of the loyalty relationship changed abruptly, and officialdom just as promptly ceased to honor the god Mithras. Notwithstanding what appears to have been a brief revival under Julian fostered by opposition to the new religion of Christianity, Mithraism disappeared within a few decades. Indeed, the bishop Ambrose of Milan (374–97) had so little information that he thought Mithras was a goddess.

Although many questions still remain unanswered, Merkelbach's new synthesis is undeniably very impressive. Impressive is not only his masterful interpretation of texts, monuments, symbols, and rituals but also his capability in transcending the mass of detail in order to present an imaginative picture of the religion in its entirety. Scholarship will no doubt take many years to examine and discuss the plethora of intriguing and provocative ideas contained in the work, among them the role of founder figures, the early influence of Platonic philosophy, the construction of religions for the purpose of social and political usage, and the puzzling analogies between early Christianity and Mithraism.

The final part of the book includes both 169 carefully selected and explained photographic plates that supply evidence for interpretations given in the earlier sections of the work and useful indices.

Layout, printing, and binding are excellent, and the high price reminds the reader that the work is indeed a precious item.

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FLUID SIGNS

Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way. By E. VALENTINE DANIEL. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.

The publication of Val Daniel's first book is an event for which students of religion can be grateful. It is a stimulating and provocative addition to the literature on at least two counts: as an interpretation of Tamil "culture" and "religion" and as a reflection on the nature of signs and symbols and on the process appropriate for their interpretation.

A native Sri Lankan Tamil, Daniel is sensitive to the nuances that underlie "fluid signs" in Tamil society. Focusing on a single village near Tiruchirapalli, Daniel's primary objective is to discover the nature of personhood in Tamil culture. The person is never isolated, nor individuated, he argues, but must always be understood in context. Indeed, the person invariably shares the quality (*kunam*; Sanskrit *guna*) of his "village" (*ūr*), "home" (*vītu*), land, or community of fellows and, ultimately, with the cosmos itself. The constant quest for compatability and equilibrium within one's context that is so fundamental to being a person is a religious enterprise in that this quest is informed by a cosmogonic myth that speaks of God's (*kaṭavūl*) equilibrium (*amaitinilai*; pp. 3–6) and the world's derivation from it.

Particularly suggestive in Daniel's discussion of Tamil personhood is his description of the *ūr* as contrasted with the *kirāma*. The latter is a geographical entity, a village with clearly defined boundaries. The former is more fluid—a meaningful space that persons usually understand contextually and the soil of which shares the quality of its inhabitants. Similarly, one's house (*vītu*), like a person, is said to be conceived, mature like a fetus, be born, and